

CHANGES IN THE
OCCUPATIONAL STATUS
OF NEGROES

1940-1950

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The period 1940-1950 marked significant shifts in the general and the Negro population in particular which were unparalleled in any similar period in the nation. Among Negroes, marked changes were observed in the occupational and industrial position of those in the labor force. The most significant changes took place during the period April, 1940 to April, 1944. Employment of Negroes in civil jobs increased by almost a million, the number of employed men rising from 2.9 to 3.2 million and the number of employed women from 1.5 to 2.1 million. The most significant changes in the Negro population was the shift from the farms to the industrial centers in the South and North. The opportunities for employment in factories were occasioned by manpower needs to produce munitions and other important equipment essential to the war effort.

Prior to World War II, there had been an upward trend among Negroes in semi-skilled and clerical positions. The war accelerated this trend and, in addition, opened many skilled and technical jobs where opportunities were extremely limited and in some cases did not previously exist.

Most of the factory gains made by Negroes preceding and during the War were in the metal, chemical and rubber group, and in the basic heavy industries such as iron, steel, and machinery industries which experienced the largest cut-backs after the War, yet the proportion of Negroes employed in industrial jobs as late as 1947, were the same as during the War. Employment of Negroes as skilled craftsmen and foremen appears to have declined since the end of World War II.

In 1940, approximately seven out of ten Negroes were concentrated in farming, domestic service, and non-farm labor. In 1949, the proportion was slightly more than five out of ten.

The occupational distribution of employed Negroes in April, 1950, based on a sample survey by the United States Department of Labor, indicates that in April, 1940, 34 per cent of the Negroes were employed as farm workers, and 66 per cent, non-farm workers. In April, 1950, a reduction of almost 50 per cent is noted in farm workers (17.9%) and an increase of approximately 18 per cent (82.1%) among non-farm workers.

Table I. --EMPLOYED NONWHITE PERSONS, BY OCCUPATION AND SEX: APRIL 1950*
(percent distribution)

Occupation	Total	Male	Female
All employed nonwhite.....	100.0	100.0	100.0
Farm.....	17.9	23.4	8.8
Nonfarm.....	82.1	76.6	91.4
Farm workers.....	100.0	100.0	100.0
Farmers, farm managers.....	51.7	58.8	28.7
Farm laborers.....	48.3	43.2	71.3
Nonfarm workers.....	100.0	100.0	100.0
Industrial workers.....	28.2	38.8	13.6
Craftsmen, foremen.....	6.3	10.7	0.2
Operatives.....	21.9	28.1	13.3
Proprietors, managers, professional workers..	6.5	6.6	6.6
Proprietors, managers, and officials.....	2.9	4.0	1.3
Professional and semi-professional.....	3.6	2.5	5.1
Clerical and sales.....	5.9	5.8	6.0
Service workers.....	44.2	24.0	72.6
Domestic service.....	22.8	3.0	50.6
Other.....	21.4	21.1	21.9
Laborers.....	15.1	24.9	1.6

* Unpublished data, Bureau of the Census, Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C.

Note: These data are derived from a sample survey and are, therefore, subject to sampling variation, which may be relatively large, particularly in those cases where the percentages are based on quantities which are small (e.g., most estimates for nonwhite persons).

In 1940, agriculture was the largest single employer of Negro labor, accounting for more than one-third of the total employment. In April, 1950, the proportion of workers on farms was approximately one in five.

The significance of urbanization on Negro workers since 1940 is reflected in the status of agricultural workers who remained on the farms. In 1940, 43.4 per cent of Negro farm workers were farmers and farm managers, and 56.4 per cent were farm laborers. ⁽¹⁾ Sample surveys in April, 1950, indicate farm owners had increased to 51.4 per cent, and the number of farm laborers during the same period had decreased to 48.3 per cent. In other words, it appears that as Negroes leave agricultural areas, more of those remaining move into the owner or manager class.

Table II.--PROPORTION OF NONWHITE TO TOTAL EMPLOYMENT IN EACH MAJOR OCCUPATIONAL GROUP, BY SEX: APRIL 1950*

(percent distribution)

Occupation	Male	Female
Employed nonwhite.....	8.3	12.0
Professional and semi-professional....	2.6	5.2
Proprietors, managers, and officials...	1.9	2.7
Clerical and sales workers.....	2.8	1.9
Craftsmen, foremen.....	3.9	2.2
Operatives.....	8.6	7.8
Domestic service workers.....	51.3	53.9
Other service workers.....	21.4	19.1
Farmers, farm managers.....	10.6	20.2
Farm laborers.....	19.8	19.2
Laborers (excluding farm).....	21.4	42.6

* Unpublished data, Bureau of the Census, Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C.

Note: These data are derived from a sample survey and are, therefore, subject to sampling variation, which may be relatively large, particularly in those cases where the percentages are based on quantities which are small (e.g., most estimate for nonwhite persons).

(1) Data for April, 1940, are based on U.S. Bureau of the Census of the U. S. Population, Vol. III. The Labor Force.

Another striking change in the occupational picture of Negroes since 1940 is the drop in the employment of Negro men and women as domestic and personal service workers. In April, 1940, Negro women constituted 60.2 per cent and Negro men, 14.6 per cent of all domestic service workers. In April, 1950, the proportion of Negro women was only 53.9 per cent and of Negro men only 10.2 per cent of these jobs. (See Table II).

In April, 1940, 16 per cent of all Negro women in the labor force were on farms. By 1944, that proportion had been halved. The total number of Negro women employed on non-farm jobs had increased by about one-third. (2) The number employed on farms had decreased by about 30 per cent. Between 1940 and 1947, Negro women employed as craftsmen, foremen, and factory operatives almost quadrupled. Despite their large increases in clerical positions and as sales women, the total in these occupational groups numbered less than 100,000 at the peak of employment in April, 1944, as compared with a total of more than 5.5 million white women in the same occupations in the same month. Approximately $3\frac{1}{2}$ times as many Negroes were employed in clerical and sales work in 1947 as in 1940. The total number employed, however, according to the United States Department of Labor, accounted for only 5 per cent of non-farm employment.

A study of figures of placements by the USBS from April, 1947, to April, 1949, indicate that the most significant advances among Negro women have been in industrial employment where they are engaged as operatives and craftsmen. Negro women have not only become emancipated in large numbers from domestic service and farm work during the past ten years, (1940-50) but they have moved in appreciable numbers in the established lines of semi-professional work such as laboratory technicians, chemical analysts, and communication jobs. While we do not have the absolute figures, the proportion of Negro women to total employment released by the Department of Labor for

the periods 1944, 1947, and 1949, indicate significant gains of Negro women as professional and semi-professional, clerical and sales workers and operatives.

About 57 per cent of all non-white women in the population at the end of 1949 reported work for pay or profit. For white women the comparable proportion was 37 per cent. The difference was particularly large among rural-farm residents with only 24 per cent of the white women reporting paid work experience as compared with 56 per cent of the non-white women. The widespread employment of Negro women as farm wage workers on the cotton crops in the South is one of the major reasons for this large difference among rural-farm women. Approximately two-thirds of the non-white women living on the farm who had paid work experience did farm work exclusively as compared with about a quarter of the comparable group of white women. (3)

In the field of skilled and technical employment, the demand for the services of Negro engineers, chemists, and other technical workers increased greatly during World War II to meet the needs of industry, the armed services, and the population in general. As may have been expected, many of these gains were lost as the Nation changed from a war to a peacetime economy. The opportunity to demonstrate skills which had not been provided before the war, enabled many Negro professional and technical workers to retain their jobs. A good precedent having been set, the trend continued upward.

Even though there are no assembled data stating the number of Negroes engaged in such highly specialized fields as engineers, chemists, architects, etc., the National Urban League, through its 58 affiliates, has obtained enough information to indicate that Negroes with adequate training in these fields are finding new opportunities in public and private employment. Several reasons are responsible for these increases:

(3) U.S. Department of Commerce, Current Population Reports, Labor Force, Series p.50, No. 24, June 16, 1950.

1. The number of Negroes in engineering schools has increased ten times over the pre-war period;
2. The enactment of anti-discrimination legislation in several states;
3. The intensified efforts of the Urban League through the Pilot Placement Project.

Through the League's placement services, fourteen engineers and one architect were employed between 1948-1949 by seven concerns with large potentials for more employment of qualified individuals in the field. Discussions on recruitment have been held with eight other concerns whose operations are international in scope. Trained Negro engineers are known to be employed by the Municipal government, and transportation companies in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. The DuPont Company, the Eastman Kodak Company, the Dairon Company, Inc., and the Union Pacific Railway Company, are only a few concerns which give reasonable assurance that where qualified Negro chemists are available, favorable consideration will be given them.

The most authentic studies of Negro workers in the building trades were made in the Spring of 1946, and a later study followed in 1947. At that time, Negro construction laborers, hod carriers, and mason tenders, constituted a decided majority in the unions representing them. Reports from usually reliable sources, including the Urban League affiliates and the USES, indicate that slight changes have occurred since 1947. The reports indicate decided obstacles on the part of skilled mechanics to secure employment to utilize their skills. Their chief difficulties grow out of the practices of several building trades unions, particularly the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and the United Association of Journeymen Plumbers and Steamfitters, both of which manage to either exclude Negro workers or limit the number employed in these fields. In some cities, the exorbitant union

initiating fee prohibits qualified Negroes from joining. In Philadelphia, for instance, the electricians union has set the initiation fee at \$300. Among the building trades, Negroes are found to be most numerous as carpenters, bricklayers, cement finishers, plasterers, and painters. The Urban League study of 1947, indicates that with the few exceptions noted, Negro building tradesmen are accepted in all building trades unions. The pattern varies from integrated to all-Negro unions. It is difficult to ascertain the number engaged in the building industries because many are unorganized.

According to a special United States Census report for 1944, Negroes comprised 31.5 per cent of all bricklayers in ten southern states, and 6 per cent of all journeymen for the country as a whole. In 1944, about one-half of the bricklayers were 40 years old or over. Today, it is estimated that 50 per cent of the bricklayers are 47 years of age or older. This trade among both Negroes and whites is reportedly losing workers faster than they are recruiting them. For the next five or seven years, all eyes will be turned toward housing, because housing is representative of the building industry. There is anticipated a demand for the next five years to satisfy the proposed minimum building needs. Reports from the Bureau of Labor Standards indicate that in the normal pre-war years, the construction industry employed between 1.5 and 2.0 million workers. The current total employment is estimated to be 2,149,000.

Limited training opportunities are available for Negroes in the building construction industry, especially so in border and Southern cities. The need for additional workers in the building construction industry has been indicated by Mr. E. R. Lerner, Special Assistant to the Housing Expediter.

During World War II, the Army trained a number of Negro carpenters, electricians, plumbers, sheet metal workers, and other mechanics. With some additional training, these workers should qualify for work in the building trades. The number of Negro youths and veterans enrolled in training programs,

however, is hardly sufficient to maintain the jobs which Negroes now hold. These problems should be of particular concern to vocational counsellors, union officials, and Urban Leagues, in view of the employment opportunities which Negroes have enjoyed in the skilled and semi-skilled categories of the building trades.

In each Census report since 1910, particularly in the South where the masses of Negroes still live, there are occupational losses indicated, especially in the skilled trades. Samuel Danley of the Bureau of Labor Standards, U.S. Department of Labor, in 1949 presented some interesting data on what is being done in apprenticeship training to qualify Negroes in the various occupations in the building trades. In his study, Mr. Danley states that opportunities for Negro apprentices have varied greatly among the trades and between localities. On the whole, training opportunities for Negroes have been best in plastering and bricklaying, and the poorest in mechanical trades -- electrical work, plumbing, and pipefitting. Exclusion from union membership has been the major difficulty and obviously a severe handicap in any area where most of the construction is done under union conditions.

A limited number of Negroes wishing to enter the building trades have been able to do so generally through on-the-job training and training in non-union apprenticeships. This is particularly true in many areas of the South where Negroes may do highly specialized mechanical jobs under white supervision. Already in certain areas of the United States, studies by the Department of Research of the National Urban League in the area of industrial relations have indicated signs of relative disadvantage on the part of Negro workers in the competition for jobs due to insufficient education and training. This poses the need for good apprenticeship and journeyman training if Negro youth and adults are to successfully compete for jobs in the building trades.

Mr. Danley's report, already referred to, states that even though

Negroes are faced with almost complete exclusion from apprenticeship training in some areas, unofficial estimates indicate that they are found in large numbers in quite a few others, including Atlanta, New York, the District of Columbia, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles and Indianapolis.

Sample studies made by the Bureau of the Census, presents interesting data on unemployment of whites and non-whites. These data are at variance with general opinions on the comparative unemployment of whites and non-whites. Unemployment data for 1948 indicates less than 1 per cent difference in the number of weeks worked by whites and non-whites.

The average duration of unemployment of non-whites is slightly higher for the quarterly reports in 1949, the greatest margin of difference is shown in July, 1949.

Granting the percentage of non-whites in the total labor force, the same as the percentages of non-whites in the total population, (approximately 10 per cent) it may be observed in Table IV that unemployment among the non-white group is decidedly larger. The reasons for these disparities have been so widely discussed that further elaboration in this report seems unnecessary.

Table III—AVERAGE DURATION OF UNEMPLOYMENT FOR WHITE AND NONWHITE PERSONS: QUARTERLY, JANUARY 1948 TO APRIL 1950
(in weeks)

Year and month	White Persons	Nonwhite Persons
1948-January	8.2	9.8
April	9.5	9.0
July	7.7	8.1
October	9.4	9.1
1949-January	7.9	6.9
April	10.0	8.7
July	10.0	8.4
October	10.9	11.1
1950-January	10.7	11.7
April	14.0	14.4

Table IV. --PROPORTION OF NONWHITE PERSONS AMONG THE LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYED
AS COMPARED WITH THEIR PROPORTION AMONG ALL UNEMPLOYED PERSONS;
QUARTERLY, JANUARY 1948 TO APRIL 1950
(in percent)

Year and month	Proportion of nonwhite persons among long-term unemployed 1/	Proportion of nonwhite persons among all unemployed
1948--January	19.3	13.4
April	13.3	15.7
July	15.9	17.9
October	14.9	18.0
1949--January	14.7	13.5
April	11.4	15.1
July	10.6	13.5
October	16.2	16.2
1950--January	20.1	16.7
April	15.1	15.6

1/ Long-term unemployed, for this table, defined as those looking for work unsuccessfully for 15 weeks or more.

Note: The estimates in Tables III and IV are derived from a sample survey and are subject to sampling variability which may be relatively large since the averages and percentages are based on small absolute numbers.

Sources: Current Population Survey
Bureau of the Census

Even though discrimination of Negroes in employment is one of the major problems in our democracy, some encouraging gains have been made during the past ten years. With larger opportunities for VOC training, the employment trends for Negro workers should continue upward.

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